

A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST

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CHAPTER XIX.

Wherein Philip Ammon is Shown Limberlost Violets.

AMMON looked at the girl in wonder. In face and form she was as lovely as any one of her age and type he had ever seen. Her school work far surpassed that of most girls of her age he knew. She differed in other ways. This vast store of learning she had gathered from field and forest was a wealth of attraction no other girl possessed. Her frank, matter of fact manner was an inheritance from her mother, but there was something more. Once, as they talked he thought "sympathy" was the word to describe it and again "comprehension." She seemed to possess a large sense of brotherhood for all human and animate creatures. She might as well have been a boy, so lacking was she in any touch of feminine coquetry toward him. He studied her wonderingly.

As they went along the path they reached a large slime-covered pool surrounded by decaying stumps and logs thickly covered with water hyacinths and blue flags. Ammon stopped.

"Is that the place?" he asked. Elnora assented.

"The doctor told you?"

"Yes. It was tragic. Is that pool really bottomless?"

"So far as we ever have been able to discover."

"And you were born here?"

He had not intended to voice that thought.

"Yes," she said looking into his eyes. "Just in time to prevent my mother from saving the life of my father. She came near never forgiving me. A little farther along is my violet bed. I want you to see it."

She led him into a swampy half open space in the woods, stopped and stepped aside. Ammon uttered a cry of surprised delight. A few decaying logs were scattered around, the grass grew in tufts long and fine. Blue flags waved, clusters of cowslips nodded gold heads, but the whole earth was purple with a thick blanket of violets nodding from stems a foot in length. Elnora knelt and slipping her fingers through the leaves and grasses to the roots, gathered a few violets and gave them to Philip.

"Can your city greenhouses surpass them?" she asked.

Ammon sat on a log to examine the blooms.

"They are superb," he said. "I never saw such length of stem or such rank leaves, while the flowers are the deepest blue, the truest violet I ever saw growing wild. They are colored exactly like the eyes of the girl I am going to marry."

Elnora handed him several others to add to those he held.

"She must have wonderful eyes," she commented.

"No other blue eyes are quite so beautiful," he said. "In fact, she is altogether lovely."

"It is customary for a man to think the girl he is going to marry lovely. I wonder if I should find her so?"

"You would," said Ammon. "No one ever fails to. She is tall as you, very slender, but perfectly rounded; you know about her eyes: her hair is black and wavy, while her complexion is clear and flushed with red."

Elnora knelt among the flowers as she looked at him.

"Why, she must be the most beautiful girl in the whole world," she cried. Ammon laughed.

"No, indeed," he said. "She is not a particle better looking in her way than you are in yours. She is a type of dark beauty, but you are just as perfect. She is unusual in her combination of black hair and violet eyes, although every one thinks them black at a little distance. You are quite as unusual with your fair face, black brows and brown hair. Indeed, I know many people who would prefer your bright head to her dark one. It's all a question of taste—and being engaged to the girl," he added.

"Edith has a birthday soon. If these last will let me have a box of them to send her?"

"I will help gather and pack them for you, so they will carry nicely. Is she interested in nature?"

"What interests Edith Carr? Let me think. First, I believe she takes pride in being just a little handsomer and better dressed than any girl of her set. She is interested in having a beautiful home, fine appointments about her, in being petted, praised and the acknowledged leader of society. She likes to find new things which amuse her and to always and in all circumstances have her own way about everything."

"Good gracious!" cried Elnora, staring at him. "But what does she do? How does she spend her time?"

"Spend her time?" repeated Ammon. "Well, she would call that a joke. Her days are never long enough. There is endless shopping to find the prettiest things, regular visits to the dressmakers, calls, parties, theaters, entertainments. She is always rushed. I never get to see half as much of her as I would like."

"But I mean work," persisted Elnora. "In what is she interested that is useful to the world?"

"Me?" cried Ammon promptly.

"I can understand that," laughed Elnora. "What I can't understand is how you can be in—She stopped short in confusion, but she saw that he had finished the sentence as she had intended. "I beg your pardon," she cried. "I didn't mean to say that. But I cannot understand these people I hear about who live only for their own amusement. Perhaps it is very great."

I'll never have a chance to know. To me it seems the only pleasure in this world worth having is the joy we get out of living for those we love and those we can help. I hope you are not angry with me."

Ammon sat silently looking far away, with deep thought in his eyes.

"You are angry," faltered Elnora. His look came back to her as she knelt before him among the flowers and he gazed at her steadily.

"No doubt I should be," he said, "but the fact is I am not. I cannot understand a life purely for personal pleasure myself. But she is only a girl, and this is her playtime. When she is a woman in her own home, then she will be different, will she not?"

Elnora never resembled her mother so closely as when she answered that question.

"I would have to be well acquainted with her to know, but I should hope so. To make a real home for a third business man is a very different kind of work from that required to be a leader of society. It demands different talent and education. Of course, she means to change, or she would not have promised to make a home for you. I suspect our dope is cool now. Let's go try for some butterflies."

"You should hear my sister Polly," said Ammon. "This was her last year in college. Lunches and sororities were all I heard her mention, until Tom Levering came on deck; now he is the leading subject."

"Is Edith Carr a college girl?"

"No. She is the very selectest kind of a private boarding school girl."

As they went back along the path together Elnora talked of many things, but Ammon answered absently. Evidently he was thinking of something else. But the moth ball recalled him, and he was ready for work as they made their way back to the woods. He wanted to try the Limberlost, but Elnora was firm about keeping on home ground. She did not tell him that lights hung in the swamp would be a signal to call up a band of men whose presence she dreaded. So they set out, Ammon carrying the dope, Elnora the net, Billy and Mrs. Comstock following with cyanide boxes and lanterns.

First they tried for butterflies and captured several fine ones with little trouble. They also called swarms of ants, beetles, bees and flies. When it grew dusk Mrs. Comstock and Ammon went to prepare supper. Elnora and Billy remained until the butterflies went to bed. Then they lighted the lanterns, repainted the trees and followed the home trail.

Mrs. Comstock and Elnora were finishing breakfast the next morning when they heard a cheery whistle down the road. Elnora with surprised eyes looked at her mother.

It was just sunrise, but the musician was Philip Ammon. He looked stronger than yesterday.

"I hope I am not too early," he said. "I am consumed with anxiety to learn if we have made a catch."

"We will have to wander along the roads and around the edge of the Limberlost today," said Elnora. "Mother is making strawberry preserves, and she can't come until she finishes. Suppose we go down to the swamp, and I'll show you what is left of the flower room that Terrence O'More, the big lumberman of Great Rapids, made when he was a homeless boy here. He was called Freckles. Of course, you have heard the story?"

"Yes, and I've met the O'Mores, who are frequently in Chicago society."

They went down the road to the swamp, climbed the snake fence, followed the path to the old trail and then turned south along it. Elnora indicated to Ammon the trail with remnants of sagging barbed wire.

"It was ten years ago," she said. "I was just a little schoolgirl, but I wandered widely even then, and no one cared. I saw him often. He had been in a city institution all his life, when he took the job of keeping timber thieves out of this swamp, before many trees had been cut. It was a strong man's work and he was a frail boy, but he grew harder as he lived out of doors and he won."

"Some days his face was dreadfully sad, some days it was so determined a little child could see the force in it, and once it was radiant. That day the Swamp Angel was with him. I can't tell you what she was like. I never saw any one who resembled her. He stopped near here to show her a bird's nest. Then they went on to a sort of flower room he had made, and he sang for her. By the time he left I had got bold enough to come out on the trail, and I met the big Scotchman Freckles lived with. He saw me catching moths and butterflies, so he took me to the flower room and gave me everything there. I don't dare come alone often, and so I can't keep it up as he did, but you can see something of how it was."

Elnora led the way and Ammon followed. The outlines of the room were not distinct, because many of the trees were gone, but Elnora showed how it had been as nearly as she could.

"The swamp is almost ruined now," she said. "The maples, walnuts and cherries are all gone. The talking trees are the only things left worth while."

"The talking trees? I don't understand," commented Ammon.

"No wonder," laughed Elnora. "They are my discovery. You know all trees whisper and talk during the summer, but there are two that have so much to say they keep on the whole winter when the others are silent. The beeches and oaks so love to talk they cling to their dead, dry leaves. In the winter the winds are stiffest and blow most, so these trees whisper, chatter, sob, laugh and at times roar until the noise is deafening. When the air is cold and clear, the world very white and the harp music swelling, then the talking trees tell the strengthening, uplifting things."

"You wonderful girl!" cried Ammon. "What a woman you will be!"

"If I am a woman at all worth while it will be because I have had such wonderful opportunities," said Elnora. "Not every girl is driven to the forest to learn what God has to say there. Here are the remains of Freckles' room. The time the Angel came here he sang to her and I listened. I never heard music like that. No wonder she loved him. Everyone who knew him did, and they do yet. Try that log, it makes a fairly good seat. This old store box was his treasure house. Just

as it's now mine. I will show you my dearest possession. I do not dare take it home because mother can't overcome her dislike for it. It was my father's, and in some ways I am like him. This is the strongest."

CHAPTER XX.

Wherein the Limberlost Sings For Ammon.

Elnora lifted the violin and began to play. She wore a school dress of green gingham, with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. She seemed a part of the setting all around her. Her head shone like a small dark sun, and her face never had seemed so rose flushed and fair. From the instant she drew the bow her lips parted and her eyes fastened on something far away in the swamp, and never did she give more of that impression of feeling for her notes and repeating something audible only to her. Ammon was too near to get the best effect. He arose and stepped back several yards, leaning against a large tree, looking and listening with all his soul.

As he changed positions he saw that Mrs. Comstock had followed them and was standing on the trail, where she could not have helped hearing every thing Elnora had said. So to Ammon before her and the mother watching on the trail Elnora played the song of the Limberlost. To the man it was a revelation. He stood so stunned he forgot Mrs. Comstock. He tried to realize what a great city audience player with a like background, and he could not imagine.

He was wondering what he dared say, how much he might express, when the last note fell and the girl laid the violin in the case, closed the door, locked it and hid the key in the rotting log at the end of a log. Then she came to him. Ammon stood looking at her curiously.

"I wonder," he said, "what people would say to that?"

"I did it in public once," said Elnora. "I think they liked it fairly well. I had a note yesterday offering me the leadership of the high school orchestra in Onabasha. I would gladly play for nothing just to be able to express myself."

"Give up the college idea," said Ammon. "Your mind does not need that sort of development. It is far past it."

"Do you really mean that you would give up all idea of going to college, if you were me?"

"If you could only realize it, my girl, you are in college, and have been all your life. You are in the school of experience, and it has taught you to think, and given you a heart. God knows I envy the man who wins it! I wouldn't even advise you to read too many books on your lines. You get your stuff first hand, and you know that you are right. What you should do is to begin early to practice self expression. Don't wait too long to tell us about the woods as you know them."

Not until then did he remember that Mrs. Comstock was somewhere very near.

"Should we go out to the trail and see if your mother is coming?" he asked.

"Here she is now," said Elnora. "Gracious, it's a mercy I got that violin put away in time! I didn't expect her so soon!" whispered the girl, as she turned and went toward her mother. Mrs. Comstock's face was a study as she looked at Elnora.

"Have you found anything yet?" she asked.

"Nothing that I can show you," said Elnora. "I am not sure but I have found an idea that will revolutionize the whole course of my work, thought and ambitions."

"Ambitions! My, what a hefty word!" laughed Mrs. Comstock. "I guess we better let ambition lie. I've always heard it was safest asleep. If you ever get a bonafide attack, it will be time to attend it. Let's hunt specimens. It is June. Philip and I are in the grades. What is the miracle of June? What one thing epitomizes the whole month?"

"The birth of these big night moths," said Elnora promptly.

Ammon clapped his hands. The tears started to Mrs. Comstock's eyes. She took Elnora in her arms and kissed her forehead.

"You'll do!" she said. "Find the distinctive feature of each month, the one thing which marks it a time apart. I can't name all of them offhand, but I think of one more right now. February belongs to our winter birds. You should hear those musicians of this swamp in February, Philip, on a mellow night. Oh, but they are in earnest! For twenty-one years I've listened by night to the great owls, all the smaller sizes, the foxes, coons and every resident left in these woods, and by day to the hawks, yellowbills, buzzards, titmice, crows and all our winter birds. It's about the best music we have. I just wonder if you

couldn't copy that alone and make a strong, original piece out of it for your violin, Elnora?"

There was one tense breath, then—"I could try," said Elnora simply.

Ammon rushed to the rescue. "We must go to work," he said, and began examining a walnut branch for Luna moth eggs. Elnora joined him while Mrs. Comstock drew her embroidery from her pocket and sat on a log. She said she was tired; they could come for her when they were ready to go. She could hear their voices all around her until she called them at supper time. When they came to her she stood waiting on the trail, the sewing in one hand, the violin in the other. Elnora became very white, but took the trail without a word. Ammon, unable to see a woman carry a heavier load than he, reached for the instrument. Mrs. Comstock shook her head. She carried the violin home, took it into her room and closed the door. Elnora turned to Ammon.

"If she destroys that I will die!" cried the girl.

"She won't," said Ammon. "You misunderstand her. She wouldn't have said what she did about the owl if she had meant to. She is your mother. No one loves you as she does. Trust her! Myself—I think she's simply great!"

Mrs. Comstock returned with serene face, and all of them helped with the supper. When it was over Ammon and Elnora sorted and classified the afternoon's specimens and made a trip to the woods to paint and light several trees for moths. When they came back Mrs. Comstock sat in the arbor, and they joined her. She went into the cabin, but she returned almost instantly, laying the violin and bow across Elnora's lap. "I wish you would give us a little music," she said.

The violin played on until Elnora was so tired she scarcely could lift the bow. Then Ammon went home. The women walked to the gate with him and stood watching him from sight.

"That's what I call one decent young man!" said Mrs. Comstock. "To see him sit in with us, you'd think he'd been raised in a cabin, but it's likely he's always had the very cream of the pot."

"Yes, I think so," laughed Elnora. "But it hasn't hurt him. I've never seen anything I could criticize. He's teaching me so much unconsciously. You know he graduated from Harvard and has several degrees in law. He's coming in the morning."

Next morning Ammon came early, and he and Elnora went at once to the fields and woods. Mrs. Comstock had come to believe so implicitly in him that she now stayed at home to complete the work before she joined them, and when she did she often sat sewing, leaving them wandering hours at a time. It was now before she finished, and then she packed a basket of lunch. She found Elnora and Philip near the violet patch, which was still in its prime. They lunched together. Then Mrs. Comstock carried the basket back to the cabin, and Ammon and Elnora sat on a log, resting for a few minutes.

"Do you remember your promise about these violets?" asked Ammon. "Tomorrow is Edith's birthday, and if I'd put them special delivery on the morning train she'd get them in the late afternoon. They ought to keep well that long. She leaves for the north next day."

"Of course you can have them," said Elnora. "We will quit long enough before supper to gather a great bunch. They can be packed so they will carry all right. They should be perfectly fresh, especially if we gather them this evening and let them drink all night."

Then they went back to hunt Cato-cane. It was a long and a happy search. Ammon came to Elnora at dusk daintily holding one by the body, its dark wings showing and its long, slender legs trying to clasp his fingers and creep from his hold.

Elnora studied the black wings intently. "I surely believe that's a Sappho," she murmured. "The Bird Woman will be overjoyed."

"We must get the cyanide jar quickly," said Ammon. "I wouldn't lose her for \$100. Such a chase as she led me!"

Elnora got the jar and began gathering up paraphernalia.

"When you make a find like that," she said, "it's the right time to quit and feel glorious all the rest of that day. I tell you I'm proud. We will go now. We have barely time to carry out our plans before supper. Won't mother be pleased to see that we have a rare one?"

"I'd like to see anyone more pleased than I am!" said Philip Ammon. "I feel as if I'd earned my supper tonight. Let's go."

He took the greater part of the load and stepped aside for Elnora to precede him. She went down the path, broken by the grazing cattle, toward the cabin and nearest the violet patch she stopped, laid down her net, and the things she carried. Ammon passed her and hurried forward.

"Aren't you going to?" began Elnora.

"I'm going to get this moth home in a hurry," he said. "This cyanide has lost its strength, and it's not working well. We need some fresh in the jar."

He had forgotten the violets. Elnora stood looking after him, a curious expression on her face. One second so—then she picked up the net and followed. At the blue bordered pool she paused and half turned back, then she closed her lips firmly and went on. It was 9 o'clock when Ammon said goodby and started to town. His gay whistle floated to them from the farthest corner of the Limberlost. Elnora complained of being tired, so she went to her room and to bed. But sleep would not come. Thought was racing in her brain, and the longer she lay the wider awake she grew. At last she softly slipped from bed, lit her lamp and began opening boxes. Then she went to work. Two hours later a beautiful birch bark basket, strongly and artistically made, stood on her table. She set a tiny alarm clock at 8, returned to bed and fell asleep instantly.

She was on the floor with the first tinkle of the alarm, and hastily dressing, she picked up the basket and a box to fit it, crept down the stairs and to the violet patch. When the basket was filled to overflowing, she set it in the stout pasteboard box,

packed it solid with mosses, tied it firmly and slipped under the cord a note.

Then she took a short cut across the woods and walked swiftly to Onabasha. It was after 6 o'clock, but all of the city she wished to avoid were asleep. She had no trouble in finding a small boy out, and she stood at a distance waiting while he rang Dr. Ammon's bell and delivered the package for Philip to a maid, with the note which was to be given him at once.

On the way home through the woods passing some baited trees she collected the captive moths. She entered the kitchen with them so naturally that Mrs. Comstock made no comment. After breakfast Elnora went to her room, cleared away all trace of the night's work and was out in the arbor mounting moths when Ammon came down the road. "I am tired sitting," she said to her mother. "I think I will walk a few rods and meet him."

"Who's a tramp?" called Ammon from afar.

"Well, not you!" retorted Elnora. "Confess that you forgot!"

"Completely," said Ammon. "But luckily it would not have been fatal. I wrote Polly last week to send Edith something appropriate and handsome today, with my card."

CHAPTER XXI.

Wherein Elnora Makes a Confession.

THESE days were the beginning of the weeks that followed. After June the moth hunts grew less frequent—the fields and woods were scoured for material for Elnora's grade work. Mrs. Comstock was a great help. Always her practical thought and sterling common sense were useful. When they were afield until exhausted they came back to the cabin for food, to prepare specimens and classify them and to talk over the day.

One warm August afternoon a blue-robed messenger entered the gate.

"I have a message for Philip Ammon."

Mrs. Comstock stepped to the back door and clanged the dinner bell sharply, paused a second and rang again. In a short time Ammon and Elnora came.

"Are you ill, mother?" cried Elnora. Mrs. Comstock indicated the boy. "There is an important message for Philip," she said.

Ammon muttered an excuse and tore open the telegram. His color faded lightly. "I have to take the first train," he said. "My father is ill and am needed."

He said goodby to Mrs. Comstock, gratefully thanked her for all her kindness and turned to Elnora.

"Will you walk to the edge of the Limberlost with me?" he asked. Elnora assented. Mrs. Comstock followed to the gate, urged him to come again soon and repeated her goodby. Then she went back to the arbor to wait Elnora's return. As she watched Elnora's return she smiled softly.

"I had an idea he would speak to me," she thought, "but this time I caught him. He hasn't time, now, and she has good reason. He is a model young man. Her lot will be utterly different from mine."

On the road Elnora spoke first. "I hope it is nothing serious," she said. "Is he usually strong?"

"Quite strong," said Philip. "I am not alarmed, but I am very much ashamed. I have allowed him to overtax himself until he is down, and mother and Polly are north at our cottage. He's never been sick before, and it's probable I am to blame that he is now."

"You have had a fine time?" asked Elnora.

"They had reached the fence. Ammon vaulted over to take a short cut across the fields. He turned and looked back at her.

"The best, the sweetest, the most wholesome time any man ever had in his world," he said. "Elnora, if I asked hours I couldn't make you understand what a girl I think you are. I never in all my life hated anything as I hate leaving you. It seems to me that I have not strength to do it."

"If you have got anything worth while from me," said Elnora, "that should be it—just to have strength to go to your duty and to go quickly. Goodby! You must hurry!"

Ammon gazed at her. He tried to drop her hand and only clutched it looser. Suddenly he drew her toward him. "Elnora," he whispered, "will you kiss me goodby?"

Elnora drew back and stared at him with wide eyes. "I'd strike you sooner," she said. "Have I ever said or

judge you sanely. I know what you mean. It would be no harm to you. It would not matter to me, but here we will think of some one else. Edith Carr would not want your lips tomorrow if she knew they had touched mine today. I was wise to say 'Go quickly!'"

Ammon still clung to her. "Will you write me?" he begged.

"No," said Elnora. "There is nothing to say save goodby. We can do that now."

Ammon held on. "Promise that you will write me only one letter," he urged. "I want just one message from you to lock in my desk and keep always. Promise you will write once, Elnora."

Elnora looked straight into his eyes and smiled serenely. "If the talking trees tell me this winter the secret of how a man may grow perfect I will write you what it is, Philip. In all the time I have known you I never have liked you so little. Goodby."

Elnora crossed the road, climbed the fence and sought the shelter of their own woods. She took a diagonal course and followed it until she came to the path leading past the violet patch. She went down this hurriedly. Her hands were clinched at her sides, her eyes dry and bright, her cheeks red flushed and her breath coming fast. When she reached the patch she turned into it and stood looking around her.

The mosses were dry, the flowers gone, weeds a foot high covered it. She turned away and went on down the path until she was almost in sight of the cabin.

Mrs. Comstock could not understand why the girl did not hurry to her with what she would have to tell. She went out and wandered around the garden. Then she stepped into the path and started back along the way leading to the woods, past the pool now framed in a thick setting of yellow lilies. Then she saw and stopped, gasping for breath. Her hands flew up, and her lined face grew ghastly. She stared at the sky and then at the prostrate girl figure. Over and over she tried to speak, but only a word came.

Elnora uttered one wild little cry and fled into her mother's arms. "Oh, mother!" she sobbed. "Will you ever forgive me?"

Mrs. Comstock's arms swept together in a tight grip around Elnora.

"There isn't a thing on God's footstool from a to z that I won't forgive you, my precious girl," she said. "Tell mother what it is."

Elnora lifted her wet face. "He told me," she panted, "just as soon as he decently could—that second day he told me. Almost all his life he's been engaged to a girl at home. He's never cared anything about me. He was just interested in the moths and growing strong."

"Elnora—the mother's head bent until the white hair mingled with the brown—"Elnora, why didn't you tell me at first?"

Elnora caught her breath in a sharp snatch. "I know I should!" she sobbed. "I will bear any punishment for not, but I didn't feel as if I possibly could. I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?" the shaking hand was on the hair again.

"Afraid you wouldn't let him come!" panted Elnora. "And, oh, mother, I wanted him so!"

For the next week Mrs. Comstock and Elnora worked so hard there was no time to talk, and they were compelled to sleep from physical exhaustion. Elnora took all the dragon flies and butterflies she could, and when she went over the list for her collection, she found, to her amazement, that with Ammon's help she once more had it complete save a pair of yellow Emperors. From every source at her command she tried to complete the series with these moths and could not find any for sale.

Then came a notification that Elnora would be compelled to attend a week's session of the teachers' institute held at the county seat twenty miles north of Onabasha the following week. They went to Onabasha together and purchased a simple and appropriate fall suit and hat, goods for a dainty little colored frock and a dress skirt and several fancy waist. Margaret Sinton came down and the sewing began. When everything was finished and packed Elnora kissed her mother goodby at the depot and the train pulled out. Mrs. Comstock went to the bank and inquired for the cashier.

"I want to know just how I am fixed here," she said. The cashier laughed. "Well, you haven't been in a hurry," he replied. "We have been ready for you any time these twenty years, but you didn't seem to pay much attention. Your account is rather flourishing."

Mrs. Comstock sank into a chair and waited while the cashier read a jumble of figures to her. It meant that her deposits had exceeded her expenses from \$100 to \$300 a year, according to the cattle, sheep, hogs, poultry, butter and eggs she had sold. The aggregate of these sums